DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 231 712 SO 014 765

AUTHOR Arons, Stephen
TITLE Compelling Belief: The Culture of American Schooling.
PUB DATE 11 Apr 83
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Montreal, Canada, April 11, 1983).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Freedom; Bureaucracy; *Censorship; *Community Control; Cultural Influences; *Educational Legislation; Elementary Secondary Education; Family School Relationship; Freedom of Speech; Moral Values; *Public Education; Socialization; Textbook Content; *Textbook Selection
IDENTIFIERS Majority Role; Pico v Island Trees Union Free School District

ABSTRACT

Majority control of schooling undercuts the freedoms of expression and belief which are central to the First Amendment and to the political health of our society. In education, First Amendment rights can only be guaranteed insofar as choice is actually available to dissenting families. However, battles over public orthodoxy are observable in family efforts to secure home education, in government regulation of private schools, and in the conflict over curriculum content and book censorship. Two illustrations are "Pico v. Island Trees Union Free School District" and the Texas Textbook Proclamation. The Supreme Court case affirmed that in book selection and curriculum decisions the majority may force its values on the minority in the name of "community." The Texas Textbook Proclamation sets official guidelines to publishers for the content of textbooks. Because Texas is one of the largest buyers of textbooks and because the guidelines are subjective and vague, publishers give in to the pressure not to offend values and ideological preferences of organized political or cultural censors. Thus, the only reasonable response is the separation of school and state, a move which would guarantee the same government neutrality and parental choice as the separation of church and state. (KC)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Stephen Arons

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED231712

Compelling Belief: The Culture of American Schooling

by

Stephen Arons

SP 021 765

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Montreal, Canada, April 11, 1983).

Compelling Belief: The Culture of American Schooling
paper presented at AERA meetings
Montreal, April 11, 1983

Abstract

The paper, whose title is drawn from the author's book of the same name (McGraw-Hill New Press 1983), is in two parts. The first articulates the thesis that majority control of schooling undercuts the freedoms of expression and belief central to the First Amendment, especially where non-wealthy families are concerned. The second part discusses the Supreme Court's 1982 censorship decision, Island Trees v. Pico, and goes beyond censorship to explore textbook selection for public schools as an example of how majoritarianism in education contributes to the creation of public orthodoxy and the political manipulation of truth.

Compelling Belief: The Culture of American Schooling

paper presented at Annual
Meetings of the AERA
Montreal, April 11, 1983
Printed in U.S.A.

by Stephen Arons
Professor of Legal Studies
University of Massachusetts, Amherst

It is paradoxical that a society should repress intellectual freedom with an institution of education, that it should undermine freedom of belief with a school system touted as a bulwark of democracy. Yet this paradox is at the heart of the culture of American schooling today and has been for most of this century.

Several years of study of conflict between families and government officials in charge of schooling provide ample evidence that the tendency to stifle dissent is built into the structure of American schooling. The official formulation of truth, proper behavior, and acceptable belief in the school system has never attained a coherence sufficient to prove the existence of a conspiracy to mold children to a single image. But the pressure of majority approved and bureaucratically organized socialization has so seriously restricted the ability of some families to preserve or develop unorthodox values and unpopular beliefs, that it is fair to refer to the prevailing school practices and policies of any era as a form of publicly sponsored orthodoxy.

The purpose of drawing attention to the paradoxical culture of American schooling is not to bury public education, but to resurrect it. Recognizing the difference between public schooling and public education is crucial to the task. It is not necessary to deny the fundamental importance of an educated

citizenry, nor to question our social commitment to universal, publicly financed, compulsory, and equally accessible education in order to attack public schooling for its systematic tendency to stifle dissent. It is necessary simply to admit what we see around us everywhere--that institutions often become ossified and end by undermining the purposes for which they were created. The theme of this paper, then, as of the book from which its title is borrowed, is to suggest that by examining the flawed structure of a beleagured public school system we may be able to devise a means to prevent public education from being destroyed by public schooling.

The paper is in two parts: first, it articulates briefly the thesis that majority control of schooling undercuts the freedoms of expression and belief which are central to the First Amendment and to the political health of our society; second, it discusses the Supreme Court's 1982 school censorship decision, Island Trees v. Pico, and goes beyond censorship to explore textbook selection as an example of how majoritarianism in education contributes to the creation of public orthodoxy.

Separation of School and State

In examining the personal consequences, political battles, and legal cases which have grown out of family-school conflict one is struck by the variety of ways in which dissent is suppressed, and by the vigor with which orthodoxy is pursued by government officials and citizen groups.

The battles over orthodoxy are observable in family efforts to secure home education, in government regulation of private schools, and in the incessant conflict over curriculum content and book censorship. These conflicts are reflections of general dislocations in American culture, but they are

necessitated by the structure of public schooling. At bottom, the suppression of dissent which characterizes American schooling is based upon three things: one factor which is an immutable attribute of all education--that it inculcates values--and two factors which are subject to change--the financial and political organization of our school system.

The starting point for understanding the effect of schooling on dissent in American society is an acceptance of the fact that education cannot be value-neutral. No back-to-basics campaign and no marketplace of ideas model can change the fact that education inevitably involves the formation and refinement of beliefs, values, and world-veiws. If such a thin value-neutral shadow of learning were possible, no teacher or student would want to be part of it. Schooling alters a child's concept of reality and, therefore, his or her perception of and reaction to all things. Whatever else it is, schooling is everywhere and inevitably a manipulator of consciousness, an inculcator of values in young minds.

Education, then, deals with the transmission of culture, with the formation of beliefs and values, with the basis of ideas and opinions which eventually inform action. Education is a matter of conscience, of socialization, of intimate communication between one generation and the next.

Submitting such communication to the control of political majorities or governments is in complete contradiction to the principles of freedom of expression and belief, and undermines the just consent of the governed on which the legitimacy of the political process rests. To the extent that political majorities are able to use schooling to harness the power of the state to their own ideologies, not only do we suffer under what John Stuart Mill called "a

despotism of the mind," we have rendered the whole concept of freedom of expression meaningless. The would-be tyrant who concentrates on the manipulation of consciousness, does not need to concern himself with restricting freedom of speech.

Historically, the battles over control of public and private schooling have been battles over socialization and value inculcation. As long ago as 1922 the state of Oregon attempted to monopolize the process of school socialization by requiring, in the name of Americanization, that all children attend public schools. In striking this statute down, the Supreme Court recognized both the socializing function of schooling and the right of families to substantial control over the upbringing of their children. "The fundamental theory of liberty upon which all governments in the Union repose," wrote the Court, "excludes any general power of the state to standardize its children by forcing them to accept instruction from public teachers only."

This understanding of the effect of schooling on value formation and of the right of parents to preserve and transmit their own values is consistent with First Amendment doctrine outside the schools. It is a tenet of freedom of expression beyond question that the government may not control the content of communication or compel the confession of belief by citizens or invade the sphere of intellect and spirit unless there be some over-riding and compelling justification for doing so. The key to government's permissible relationships to the content of communication is neutrality. The First Amendment prevents the government from favoring or penalizing any communication on the basis of its content.

The question then becomes how the government can maintain a position of neutrality toward compulsory schooling when that schooling cannot be value neutral. Ivan Illich called the school "the established church of secular times." Presumably this situation is tolerable to those whose wealth makes it possible for them to escape government run schools for a private alternative consistent with their values and beliefs. This suggests that the only reasonable response to the requirement of government neutrality in schooling is the guarantee of parental choice first articulated in Pierce. The wall of separation of church and state should be matched in the realm of secular values by a separation of school and state; but this can be accomplished only insofar as choice is actually available to dissenting families. And here is the point at which we see that the political and financial structure of schooling becomes the cause of suppression of dissent. The right of choice guaranteed by Pierce and essential to the preservation of First Amendment freedoms of belief and intellect has been eroded by a taxing and spending mechanism which conditions choice in schools on the economic status of the family. Taxes are collected from all, but may only be spent on the education of those who agree to submit to school socialization provided by government schools. In a word, freedom of choice for the rich, compulsory socialization for the rest.

Not only is the content of the only school available to most people within the control of the political majority, but, increasingly, so is the content of alternatives to public schooling. In fact, the more these alternatives are used, the stronger is the impetus of government to control their content. The

legacy of struggles over home education and private schooling on one hand, and public school content on the other hand, is a Hobson's choice. Those dissidents who are left to the public schools must either abandon their values, or commit themselves to a political struggle to impose them on others. Those who can buy their way out, increasingly find themselves pursued by majority orthodoxy in the regulation of private alternatives. This is the message of the Supreme Court forty years ago when it declared "If it is to impose any ideological discipline...each party or denomination must seek to control, or failing that, to weaken the influence of the educational system." The result, demonstrable by examining conflicts between families and schools, is that our education system has become a vehicle for the systematic suppression of dissent in the name of social cohesion and democratic government.

The primary victims of the unequal distribution of liberty are, predictably, the poor, the working class, and the racial and ethnic minorities which are over-represented in these groups. Inflation and economic stratification make middle class families victims too. Those who are least able to make themselves felt in the political process are short-changed all around: they have the smallest influence over how their children are schooled, the least security that they will be able to pass on their aspirations and values to their children, and the least freedom to engage in that most intimate and important form of communication, child-rearing.

The Politics of Knowledge:
Book Censorship and Selection
as a case in point

Conflict over home education and private schooling provides a fertile ground for exploring the details of how majoritarianism suppresses dissent in schooling.

But because these topics are to be dealt with by others today, and because I have had my say on these subjects elsewhere, I shall focus the remainder of this discussion on one aspect of the politics of knowledge required by a majoritarian organization of the public school system, book censorship. I will not, however, limit myself to a discussion of the removal of books from schools, as the Supreme Court has. The distinction between censorship and selection has been useful mostly to obscure the fact that the political selection of required books for public schools gives rise to a massive exercise in anti-intellectualism and the suppression of dissent.

The Supreme Court's only case on book censorship in public schools, the June 1982 decision in Island Trees v. Pico, arose out of a set of facts similar to all-too-many conflicts around the country in recent years. As numerous studies and observers have reported, an epidemic of censorship has spread across the country in the past three years, involving nearly one third of all school districts in challenges to the presence of books in libraries or in school curriculum. The effort to sanitize what children are exposed to and must study has come predominantly from the right; but it has not been their exclusive domain. Efforts to excise race and gender stereotypes and stigmas from school books for example have drawn attention and conflict in many parts of the country.

The essence of these conflicts over content does not lie in whose values are correct or more meritorious, but in the fact that all over the country parents and political groups have been drawn into conflict with each other over which versions of truth shall be adopted by local schools. Parents who fear that society has lost its cohesion or who feel that their vision of right living

is not reflected in schooling have been unable to choose alternatives to public education and have therefore been left to fight it out with each other over the shape of government schools. These battles over social reconstruction are further fueled by the ideology of majoritarian schooling which holds that public schools are an appropriate avenue of social reform through inculcation of better values in the rising generation.

Among those who have not retreated into apathy about their children's education, the pitched conflicts over books and curriculum in public schools are necessitated not only by the inability to choose an alternative form of schooling, but by the absence of diversity within public schools. Compromise is typically unacceptable in these contests. The number of books and the curriculum to be used are limited by the organization of the school; and the struggle over which books and curriculum will be chosen becomes one in which there are, in a temporary and superficial sense, winners and losers. The majority, or whoever controls the schools, must be convinced that some points of view and beliefs are unacceptable and must be eliminated, while others should be legitimized as community values.

Island Trees v. Pico was such a case, though it proceeded from a base of such mindless irrationality that it is not truly typical. Malamud's The Fixer had to be eliminated because it was "anti-semitic" and a collection of short stories edited by Langston Hughes had to be eliminated because it was "anti-Negro." Other notable works of literature were banned as "filth" or as "anti-Christian" and "anti-American." The school board, which responded to the claims of some parents, but not others, that their values ought to be reflected in the schools, claimed the absolute power to determine library content and

curriculum in the name of the community. After six years of litigation the US Supreme Court ruled that the First Amendment imposed some limitations on the claimed absolute power of the school board to remove books from school libraries. The Court sidestepped all issues of curriculum control and book selection. No one really won the case. Though it ruled that the Constitution "does not permit the official suppression of ideas" through removal of school library books, the Court affirmed the school board's position that "...local school boards must be permitted 'to establish and apply their curriculum in such a way as to transmit community values...and...(to promote) respect for authority and traditional values be they social, moral, or political.'"

Thus did the Supreme Court turn back the claim of school boards to absolute discretion in removing library books from the shelves, but affirm the equally incomprehensible argument that in book selection and curriculum decisions, the majority may force its values on the minority in the name of "community." These contradictory conclusions about intellectual freedom and majority control of schooling reflect an understandable reluctance to confront the incompatibility of the entire structure of public schooling with the principles of freedom of belief and expression. But the Court's divided and multifarious positions in Island Trees seem only to invite more conflict over values in majority-controlled schooling.

The distinction which made it possible for the Court to avoid the basic issue of intellectual freedom in public schools was the distinction between censorship and selection. The textbook and curriculum selection process, the Court assumed, is one in which majority political decisions must prevail. There is, after all, a limit to the number of texts which may be chosen and

required in class, the number of books which can fit on a library shelf, and the number of subjects and points of view which can be included in a required curriculum. What but the democratic process is suitable to making these decisions in a public education system? This may seem a reasonable position, until one realizes that what the Court is suggesting is that the majority has the legal power to control virtually the entire socialization and value inculcation process in public schools. If the practical operation of public schools leads to such a conclusion, can 1984 be far away? If only those dissenters with substantial wealth can remove their children from this process of "inculcating fundamental values," has not a basic liberty been effectively denied to those with the least power to protect themselves?

A brief look at one aspect of book selection should be sufficient to show how the Court's refusal to recognize the reality of conflict over government schools leaves intact an Orwellian exercise in doublethink and orthodoxy affecting every school child.

Twenty three of fifty states have state-wide processes for the selection of school texts which become available to local education agencies. Of these, two states, Texas and California, buy 20% of the textbooks purchased annually. The annual Texas budget for such books is now so large that as a recent report by People For the American Way put it, "As Texas Goes, So Goes the Nation." The economics of the textbook industry is apparently such that textbooks designed to meet the needs of the two largest buyers often become the only editions available around the country. What effect does the process of textbook selection in Texas have on knowledge available to school children, required in their curricula and tested for by their teachers?

The essential fact of textbook selection and production for public schools is that these books are written to specifications established by a political process. Definitions of acceptable knowledge and truth are first created by political appointees responsive to public pressure. Textbooks are then altered, or written, to conform to these official definitions of truth. In some cases an author will be confronted with the need to change his or her work in order to make it saleable. In other cases the publisher may have the book written in-house to avoid the potential conflict between knowledge and politics. As far as the nation's school children are concerned, knowledge is not the result of independent inquiry and open exchange; it is the design of a consumer product. In this business, market research takes the form of political dealing; and intellectual integrity is replaced by economic and political pressures. Finally, the books are placed on the approved list and local schools and teachers are "free" to select the textbooks which will best help them educate their charges and in the Supreme Court's words promote "respect for authority and traditional values." This is respect for authority with a vengeance.

The mechanics of the Texas textbook selection process create a political battleground for any group with an ideological axe to grind.* At the heart of the process is the Texas Textbook Proclamation which annually sets the offical guidelines and separate general guidelines for the content of textbooks. Compliance with these guidelines is required if the state is to permit their purchase for use in public schools. The State Board of Education creates these guidelines, which then become the basis for hearings and recommendations by the Texas State Textbook Committee. The Committee's hearings provide an opportunity for any

---

*The following description of this process is drawn largely from the work of Barbara Parker, Director of the Schools and Libraries Project of People For the American Way.

Texan to object to a textbook offered for adoption by detailing those objections in a "Bill of Particulars." Publishers are permitted to respond in writing; and the two sides appear before the Committee at a heated exchange each August. In each subject area in which books are being considered, the Committee recommends no more than five texts and no fewer than two books to the Commissioner of Education who can, apparently, negotiate changes in the textbooks with the publishers even after the Committee has made its recommendations. Finally the Commissioner makes recommendations to the State Board of Education which makes the final decisions each year in November (presumably for adoption the following academic year).

Until this year only citizens who object to the textbooks have been permitted to appear before the Committee to participate in the democratic definition of reality. On this ground and numerous others the process has been challenged for its denial of a fair mechanism in making decisions about which $60 million worth of books will be required in 1100 Texas school districts. But take note: these complaints do not challenge the existence of a process for the political manipulation of the content of textbooks; they simply ask that the process be more even-handed.

In the era in which the Church defined heresy and the Inquisition was its instrument, Galileo was made to recant his astronomical findings because his view of the world disagreed with the Pope's. In the secular era in which democracy defines acceptable truth and due process is its instrument, those who are "educated" by the state cannot be instructed in worldviews displeasing to politicians. No wonder Thomas Hodgskin said "men had better be without education than be educated by their rulers."

The guidelines embodied in the Texas Textbook Proclamation (the specifications of knowledge with which publishers must comply) are a testament to the mental deterioration which results from putting knowledge and learning under the control of the political process. Section 1.3 of the general guidelines, for example, requires that textbooks which deal with evolution "shall be edited, if necessary, to clarify that the treatment is theoretical rather than factually verifiable." Cave paintings, carbon-dated fossils, and geological formations showing the age of the earth to be more than 10,000 years would presumably be edited appropriately. Section 1.5 provides that textbooks "shall promote...understanding of the free enterprise system...(and) emphasize patriotism..." The Puritans, of course, were not patriots because in spite of being Christians, they clamped strict limits on wages, prices and usury. Further on in the same section, it is required that "Textbooks shall not contain material which serves to undermine authority." Rosa Parks' refusal to sit in the back of the bus in Montgomery and Martin Luther King's support for such civil disobedience would remain unknown, as would the Declaration of Independence. In section 1.8 textbooks are forbidden to include "material which would cause embarrassing situations or interference in the learning atmosphere of the classroom." Admitting that Japanese-Americans were interned during W.W.II or that slavery was an American credo for more years than public schooling has been would no doubt be embarrassing and cause atmospheric disturbances in the classroom. In section 1.9 (5) textbook content is forbidden to "encourage life styles deviating from generally accepted standards of society." The life of Christ, of course, cannot be part of an inquiry into world history.

More than their inanity, the vagueness of these guidelines sets up a

situation in which enormous pressure can be brought to bear on publishers to print the bland and uninformed drivel that will not offend the values and ideological preferences of organized political or cultural censors. The guidelines permit almost anything to be challenged; and success follows the degree of hysteria which objectors can create. The word "evolution" does not appear at all in the text of a 1981 biology textbook published by Doubleday. Shirley Jackson's short story, "The Lottery" , was deleted from four literature anthologies in 1978. Textbook discussions of the Great Depression have been objected to because they raise doubts about "our system." Words have been removed from dictionaries so that they can be sold to public schools. Orwell's Ministry of Truth is fully operational 18 months ahead of schedule. The masters of this process are Melvin Gabler and his wife, who along with their full time staff of eight, keep a close watch on texts which might contain "abnormal attitudes and alien thoughts." But the point, of course, is not the trogdylitic views of the Gablers, or their influence on textbook publishing nationwide, or how we all need to work together to be sure "the real truth" gets into school textbooks. The point is that the nature of the process by which knowledge is cut, pared, peeled, diced, sorted, and re-arranged to satisfy the political system before it can be served to public school students is a national scandal.

We cannot blame the publishers for this sorry state of affairs. They are in business; and selling out is part of selling textbooks. If you don't do it, you don't stay in business. It's doubtful that textbook publishers would want to eliminate this selection process, for it vastly simplifies the market decisions they must make. We can't blame the Gablers or any other

group of objectors, either. They are simply using the process prescribed by statute and condoned by courts to save the society by manipulating the socialization of children. There are plenty of people whose values most of us share who would be delighted to help pick the textbooks other people's children should be required to study. What we can do is recognize that this completely typical and totally corrupt method of selecting textbooks for a captive audience is an expression of orthodoxy consistent with majority control of schooling and directed at the suppression of dissent. The Supreme Court of the United States to the contrary notwithstanding--textbook selection is not different from censorship.

Even this very brief and sketchy introduction to the politics of textbook selection may point to the costs incurred by a society which refuses to admit that its educational system is organized to suppress dissent. The way to deal with this fact is to overhaul the financial and political structure of schooling so that every family has an equal ability to choose the type of schooling its children receive.

We are all struggling with a collectivist impulse which we sorely need to apply to the public life of adults, but which is horribly misplaced in governing public education. The drive for social cohesion, felt most strongly by those who fear that the culture has lost its hold and can no longer explain the past or predict the future, cannot be given vent in schooling or schools will be immobilized by irreconcileable conflict.

To save public education we must loosen the government's hold on public schools.

To preserve freedom of thought and expression, we must insure that educational liberty is equally available to all.

To re-create a sense of community we must abandon the pursuit of orthodoxy and heed the words of an earlier and wiser Supreme Court, that "Compulsory unification of opinion achieves only the unanimity of the graveyard.